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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined adolescent students' achievement values. Study 1 participants were 146 male and 161 female African American seventh and eighth graders attending an all-black middle school. Using sociometric procedures, participants nominated classmates whom they admired, respected, and wanted to be like. These nominations were combined to create a "value index." Respondents also nominated classmates who tried hard, followed school rules, did not try hard, did not follow school rules, wore nice clothes, and were good at sports. All participants were classified according to achievement level (high, medium, or low). Gender differences in the nomination pattern revealed that girls valued high-achieving girls more than low-achieving girls. The opposite was true for African American male respondents, who tended to show preferences for low-achieving boys. These gender patterns were partially replicated in an ethnically diverse middle school sample consisting of 159 African American, 240 Latino, and 60 White middle school students. In this second study, girls across the three ethnic groups tended to value same-ethnicity girls who were high achievers. White males showed a pattern of preferences similar to girls. African American and Latino boys, on the other hand, valued males who were low achievers. The implications of the findings for gender by ethnicity differences in adolescent achievement values are discussed. (Contains two tables, four figures, and five references.) (Author/SLD)

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Running head: THE VALUE OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Falling Stars: The Valuing of Academic Achievement Among African American, Latino, and White Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined adolescent students' achievement values. Study 1 participants were 146 male and 161 female African American 7th and 8th graders attending an all-Black middle school. Using sociometric procedures, participants nominated classmates whom they admired, respected, and wanted to be like. These nominations were combined to create a "value" index. Respondents also nominated classmates who tried hard, followed school rules, did not try hard, did not follow school rules, wore nice clothes, and were good at sports. All participants were classified according to achievement level (high, medium, or low). Gender differences in the nomination pattern revealed that girls valued high achieving girls more than low achieving girls. The opposite was true for African American male respondents who tended to show preferences for low achieving boys. We partially replicated these gender patterns in an ethnically diverse middle school sample consisting of African American, Latino, and White middle school students (n's = 159, 240, and 60 respectively). In Study 2, girls across the three ethnic groups tended to value same-ethnicity girls who were high achievers. White males showed a pattern of preferences similar to girls. African American and Latino boys, on the other hand, valued same gender males who were low achievers. The implications of the findings for gender by ethnicity differences in adolescent achievement values are discussed.

Falling Stars: The Valuing of Academic Achievement Among African American, Latino, and White Adolescents

A great deal of motivation research documents that children who believe that achievement is due to effort are more likely to persist after failure than those who believe that achievement is determined by ability. Attribution theory can account for this robust empirical finding by analyzing the causal distinctions between effort and ability (see Weiner, 1986). According to the theory, effort is internal, unstable and controllable. This means that effort is perceived as a characteristic of the person that is both modifiable and subject to volitional influence (i.e. you can try harder next time). Ability, on the other hand, is perceived as internal, but stable and uncontrollable (i.e. you are either able or unable to achieve and this is a chronic condition). It therefore seems reasonable that children who value effort and recognize its importance are more likely to do well in school, especially when failure is encountered, compared to those who consider ability to be the major factor in determining achievement.

Because effort is a key variable in achievement contexts, some researchers have suggested that one explanation for poor school performance among African American children is that they do not value effort and working hard. For example, Steinberg, Dornbusch and Brown (1992) argued that perceived barriers to mobility are so great that African American youth may not recognize effort-outcome covariation. Drawing on their anthropological studies, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested that African American students have developed an opposition to activities such as academic achievement that are considered to be the domain of White Americans. High achievement and working hard, elements relating to academic success, may be associated with "acting white" and therefore may be devalued among African American youth, particularly adolescents.

While this notion of African American youth devaluing effort has much popular appeal, as yet there is relatively little empirical research on the topic. Even fewer studies address what African American children do value, be that achievement or otherwise. This is consistent with general research in motivation which has tended to neglect the study of values (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994).

The two studies reported here begin to address the lack of research on achievement values, particularly among African American youngsters. Our goal was to examine whether academic achievement and hard work are indeed devalued by samples of early adolescents who differ in gender and ethnicity.

In devising a methodology that lessened social desirability, we used sociometric procedures where participants nominate classmates who fit various behavioral descriptions. Here we asked participants to nominate the classmates whom they most admired, respected, and wanted to be like. Our rationale for these questions was that if we can identify the characteristics of individuals whom an adolescent admires, respects, and wants to be like, this tells us something about the characteristics they value. We also had students nominate peers who fit the descriptions of working hard and getting good grades, goofing off and not getting good grades, following school rules or not following school rules, being good at sports, and wearing nice clothes. Asking these additional questions allowed us to examine relations between being "valued" (i.e., nominated as admired, respected, etc.) and other characteristics such as trying hard or not, being socially compliant, and having non academic-related competencies such as being a good athlete.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants.

Participants were 146 male and 161 female African American 7th and 8th graders from 10 classrooms of students attending a predominantly Black (99%) middle school in the Los Angeles area. Only students who returned signed parent consent forms participated in the study.

Materials

Participants completed a 9-item sociometric instrument in their homerooms. With the aid of a class roster, students were instructed to write the names of three students whom they most: (1) admired; (2) respected; and (3) wanted to be like. They also nominated classmates who: (4) work hard and get good grades; (5) "goof off" and don't get good grades; (6) follow school rules; (7) don't follow school rules; (8) are good at sports; and (9) wear nice clothes. After the peer nominations were completed, students participated in a competitive, timed word game for which each participant received a prize. All procedures were conducted by three African American and one Caucasian female graduate students who worked in pairs.

While students completed the peer nomination procedures, their homeroom teachers rated each student's achievement level on a 9-point scale (1 = *very low achiever*; 9 = *very high achiever*). These ratings were used to divide participants into three achievement levels, designated as high (ratings of 7 to 9), medium (4 -6) and low (1-3).

Results

Table 1 shows the correlations for all the nomination questions. Nominations for "admire", "respect", and "want to be like" were highly intercorrelated (average r=.70). That is, the more nominations a student had for being admired, the more he or she received for being respected and chosen as someone the nominator wanted to be like. These nominations were therefore summed to form one "value" index.

All respondents were classified as high, medium or low achievers based on teacher ratings of their achievement. Using loglinear analysis, we then examined the "value" nominations as a function for both the achievement level and gender of the nominated student. All of the participants in this study were African American and the data for female and male respondents were examined separately.

Figure 1 shows the data for female respondents. There was a significant $\chi^2(2) = 14.85$ $p < .001$, indicating an effect of gender and achievement level of nominee. Girls overwhelmingly reported that they valued other girls (92%). Girls also tended to nominate high achieving girls (48%) more than medium (28%) and low achieving girls (16%).

Figure 2 shows the data for Black male respondents and here the pattern is quite different, significant $\chi^2(2) = 101.70$ $p < .001$. Boys were more likely to value other boys rather than girls (69% versus 31%). These within gender preferences however, were weaker than those shown by girls. If African American males nominated girls, the pattern showed a linear relationship between achievement level and valuing. That is, boys were more likely to nominate high achieving girls as valued (57%) than low achieving girls (5%). These percentages exceeded what would have been expected if there was no relationship between achievement level and value nominations.

When we turn to males' nominations for other boys, the respondents overwhelmingly nominated (over-valued) low achievers and under nominated (under-valued) high achieving boys: respectively, $z = 4.34$ and -3.53, p's $< .01$.

In summary, the data showed that girls valued high achieving girls more than average and low achieving girls. Boys on the other hand valued low achieving boys more than high achieving boys. While challenging the notion that African American adolescents do not value effort and achievement, the data do suggest that Black male and females might differ in the achievement characteristics that they value.

An unanswered question from study 1 is whether the gender differences in the valuing of effort are specific to African Americans or whether there is a general devaluing of effort among boys relative to girls during adolescents. The suggestion that boys do not value high achievers may simply be a reflection of the values of all males at this age, regardless of their ethnicity. It may be the case that pre-adolescent males rebel against authority and social expectations during this stage of development. To begin to explore the generality of these findings, we replicated study 1 in an ethnically diverse school with African American, Latino, and White participants.

STUDY 2

Method

The methods in this study were exactly the same as those in Study 1 except that the participant population was comprised of 159 African American (male n=67), 240 Latino (male n=124), and 60 White (male n=28) 6th-8th graders attending an ethnically diverse middle school. In addition, students' achievement levels were determined from their cumulative grade point averages which were obtained from their school records.

Results

Frequencies showed that girls overwhelmingly nominated other girls (89%) and boys strongly preferred other boys (72%) as admired, respected, and wanting to be like ($\chi^2(1) = 964.26$ $p < .001$

Figure 3 shows the data for female respondents' nominations of other females as a function of ethnicity and achievement level. The first panel shows the data for African American female respondents. There was an effect for ethnicity and achievement level $\chi^2(4) = 67.42$ $p < .001$. Girls nominations indicated that they valued medium achievers (35%) and high achievers (54%) but not low achievers (12%). They were also more likely to nominate other African American

females (58%) compared to Latinas (24%) and Whites (19%). Given that they were most likely to nominate high achievers and African Americans, the nomination pattern for high, medium, and low achieving African Americans did not differ significantly form what one would expect (all z's <1.96). However, when it came to nominations of White females, the percentage of responses that went to high achievers exceeded what one would expect by chance ($z=4.95$ $p < .01$).

A similar patter of data was found for Latina's (see middle panel of figure 3). A significant $\chi^2(4) = 85.06$ $p < .001$ indicated an effect of ethnicity and achievement level. Like African American females, Latinas were more likely to value high achievers (45%) and medium achievers (38%) and least likely to value low achievers (17%). Latinas also showed within ethnicity preference in that they were more likely to value other Latinas (65%) compared to African American (17%) and white (18%) females.

The loglinear analysis showed that nominations for high achieving black females and white females exceeded what would be expected if there was no relationship between what Latinas valued in terms of ethnicity and achievement level. They also under nominated medium achieving African American and White females. For the Latina nominees, the medium achievers received more nominations that would be expected relative to the other two ethnic groups ($z = 3.47$ $p < .01$).

Among the white females there was a significant $\chi^2(4) = 62.37$ $p < .001$. White females overwhelmingly valued high achieving girls (65%) compared to medium (23%) and low achieving girls (12%). They also tended not to select African American girls (13%) compared to Latinas (46%) and other whites (41%). When other white females were valued, those who were high in achievement greatly exceeded what would be expected by chance ($z = 2.66$, $p < .05$), whereas the nominations for low and medium achieving white females were lower than what one would have expected ($z = -2.90$ and -2.35 respectively, p's $< .05$).

In summary, frequencies showed that students overwhelmingly made same gender nominations. Girls tended to make same ethnicity "value" nominations with the exception of White females who had high nominations for both Latina and White females. In addition, girls tended to "value" high or medium achieving females and not low achieving females. This was true for each ethnic group.

Figure 4 shows the data for male respondents' nominations of other males as a function of ethnicity and achievement level. The first panel shows a significant $\chi^2(4) = 10.72$ $p < .05$. African American boys were more likely to nominate as valued, other African American boys (64%) compared to Latino (26%) and White boys (10%). However, among their black nominees, African American males tended to over nominate low achieving African American males.

Among Latinos (middle panel, $\chi^2(4) = 37.74$ $p < .001$) boys overwhelmingly valued other Latino boys (80%) compared to African American (11%) and white boys (9%). Latinos also preferred low achievers (42%) compared to high achievers (24%) with medium achievers falling in between (35%). As with African American males, Latinos also tended to over nominate their low achieving male classmates.

The third panel shows a significant $\chi^2(4) = 39.89$ $p < .001$. White males showed a preference for while male classmates (57%) compared to Latinos (25%) and African American males (18%). They also overwhelmingly valued high achievers (67%) compared to medium achievers (23%) and low achievers (10%). Thus, the white male data resembled the female response pattern more than it resembled that of African American and Latino males. These nominations of high achieving white males far exceeded what would have been expected by chance ($z = 2.01$ $p < .05$).

In summary, findings for White male value nominations are similar to that for girls in that they preferred high achievers to medium or low achievers. In contrast however, African American

and Latino males are more likely to nominate low achievers as being valued and least likely to nominate high achievers. This data for African American males replicates the data in study 1.

INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results raise concern for minority males' achievement values and underscore some of the problems these youngsters face when viewed from a motivational perspective. There is little doubt that the popular press and other media confirm negative images of young African American and other minority males, often associating being minority and male with academic disengagement and social deviance. It may therefore be that minority males in our study are partly responding to the perceived stereotypes of others. For these students, adopting a "cool pose" (Majors & Bilson, 1992), that is, displaying relative indifference to those who display achievement behaviors that are valued by the larger society, may be one esteem-protecting mechanism by which such youngsters cope with the dual stresses of academic challenge and perceived discrimination.

On the other hand, we cannot be certain that our findings indicate that ethnic minority males actually do devalue effort. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, value nominations also are positively correlated with nominations for wearing nice clothes and being good in sports. Thus, rather than devaluing effort, the data for minority males might be demonstrating that these young adolescents value some nonacademic - but positive - characteristics, such as being well dressed or athletically competent

Future studies might examine these hypotheses as well as the added possibility of developmental trends in the value structures held by youth. There are no easy answers to questions raised by our findings, for no doubt they cannot be understood without more attention to the complex interplay between ethnicity and gender among adolescent populations. We also believe that the study of achievement values and how they get expressed in the broader context of social influences (i.e., peers, parents) is an untapped source of information about motivational processes in ethnic minority youth.

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Table 1

Correlations Between the Nominations Across All Respondents: Study 1

	Admire	Respect	BeLike	Effort	Rules	NoEffort	NoRules	Sports	Clothes
Admire	--								
Respect	.73***	--							
BeLike	.74***	.64***	--						
Effort	.60***	.61***	.50***	--					
Rules	.39***	.51***	.33***	.78**	--				
NoEffort	-.11	-.14*	-.05	-.24**	-.25***	--			
No Rules	-.07	-.12*	-.02	-.24**	-.26***	.91***	--		
Sports	.16**	.07	.22***	-.04	-.15*	.29***	.31***	--	
Clothes	.49***	.39***	.59***	.15*	-.03	-.04	-.00	.20**	--

Table 2

Correlations Between the Nominations Across All Respondents: Study 2

	Admire	Respect	BeLike	Effort	Rules	NoEffort	NoRules	Sports	Clothes
Admire	--								
Respect	.84***	--							
BeLike	.86***	.79***	--						
Effort	.58***	.57***	.54***	--					
Rules	.16***	.20***	.13**	.54***	--				
NoEffort	-.09*	.00	-.07	-.15**	-.05	--			
No Rules	-.06	-.06	-.03	-.09*	.11**	.80***	--		
Sports	.33**	.35***	.31***	.39***	.14***	.29***	.13**	--	
Clothes	.34***	.40***	.33***	.29***	.28***	-.04	.25**	.40***	--

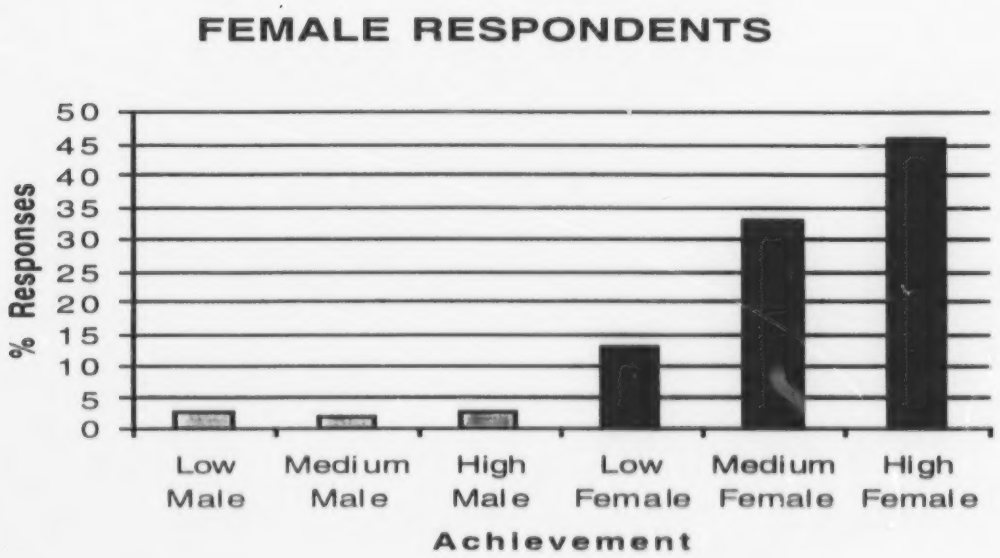

Figure 1. Percentage of female respondents' nominations by gender and achievement level.

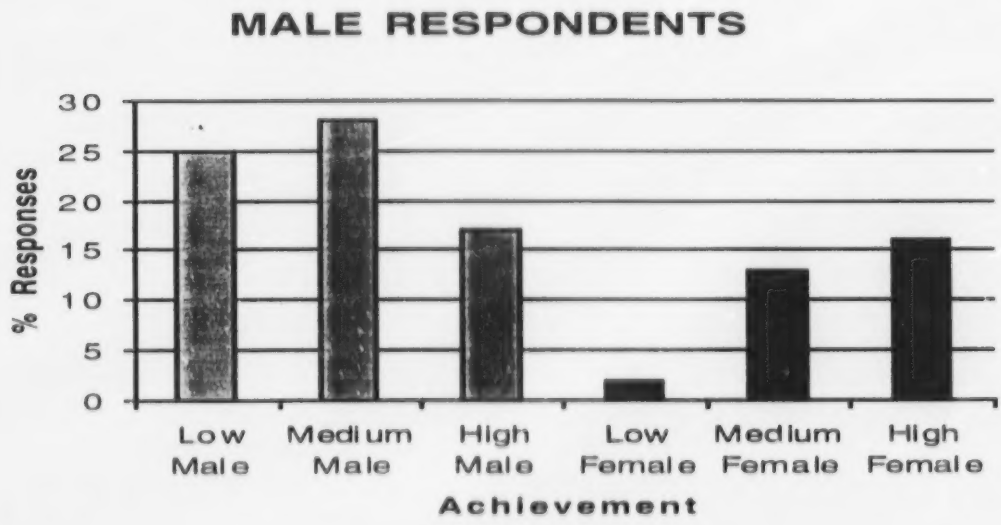

Figure 2. Percentage of male respondents' nominations by gender and achievement level.

Figure 3. Percent of same gender "value" nominations by ethnic group: Female respondents

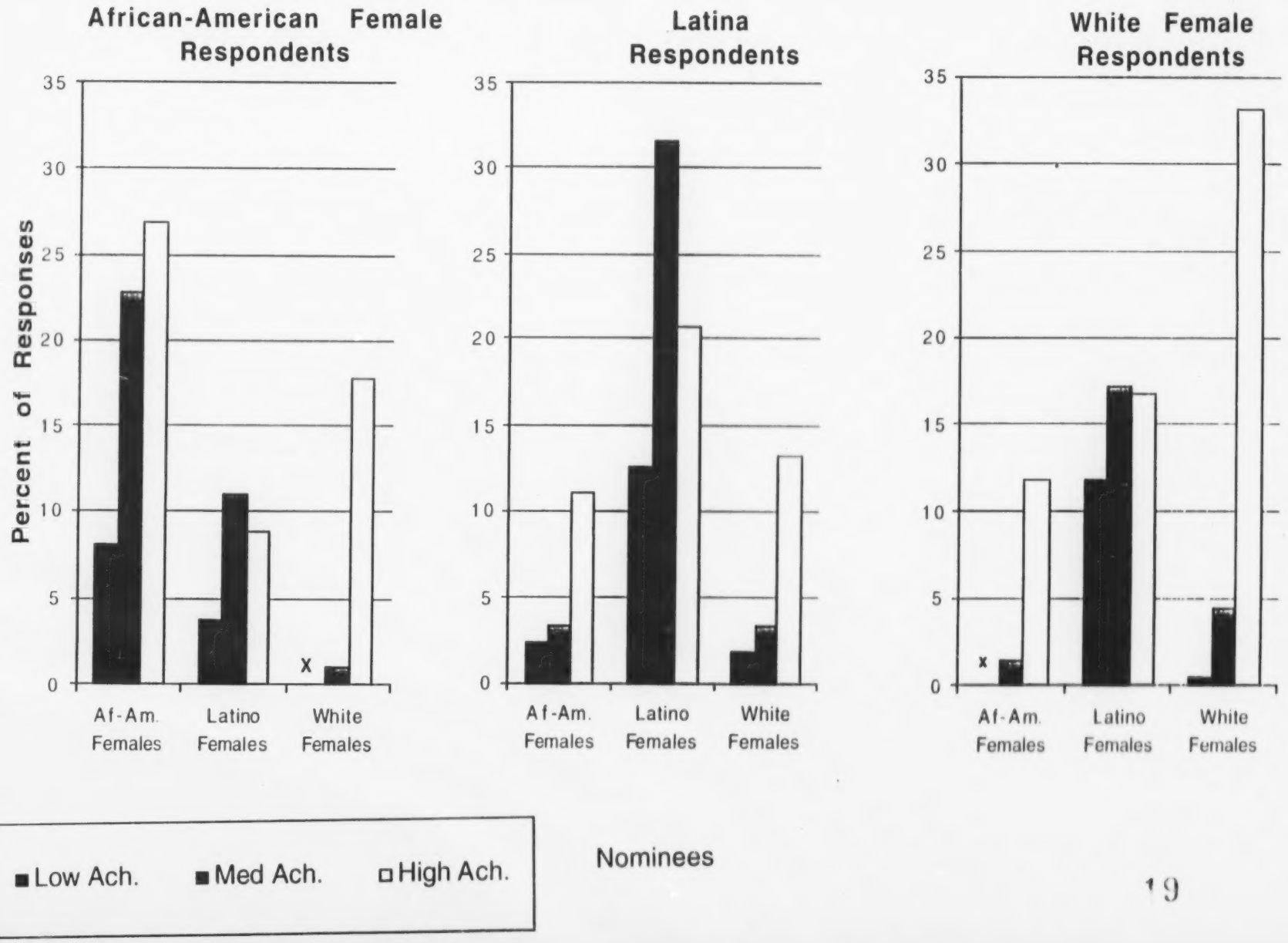

Figure 4. Percent of same gender "value" nominations by ethnic group: Male respondents